

**Speech of U.S. Ambassador Kenneth H. Merten
« Haitian Woman of Courage » for Madame Florence Elie
Thursday, March 31, 2011**

Ladies, Gentlemen,
Distinguished guests,
Members of the press,

Thank you. Today we come together to discuss the important role that women of courage play in the national life in Haiti. Today of course, is the last day of March, which is Women's History Month. Throughout this month, which includes International Women's Day on March 8, we have been reflecting on the extraordinary accomplishments of women throughout the world, from ordinary women who work daily to defend human dignity and advance the struggle to participate in society on an equal basis with men, to those women who have changed the course of history. As all of you know, more work needs to be done before we reach this goal.

As part of this celebration, the U.S. government chooses to recognize women throughout the world who demonstrate courage and leadership in advocating for women's rights and empowerment, often at great personal risk. For the fifth consecutive year, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton presented the International Women of Courage Awards to several women who are making a difference in their countries.

Here in Haiti, of course, there are many women making history but today we would like to highlight the efforts of one particular woman as recipient of the Woman of Courage for Haiti. This is a phenomenal woman who has dedicated her professional life to protecting human rights, whether it be the rights of those who have been victimized by the misdeeds of government agents or through the indifference of the state.

Of course, I am talking about Madame Florence Elie.

As head of the Office of Protection of the Citizen, Madame Elie has confronted the challenges of the earthquake, including the lack of security for those living in displaced persons camps. She has confronted human trafficking and the abuse of prisoners, and she co-chaired a joint UN-GOH commission to investigate the deaths of prisoners in Les Cayes prison, allegedly killed in cold blood by authorities there. And this work has made an impact; security conditions have improved in a number of camps, and several of the police officers implicated in the Les Cayes killings are in jail, awaiting trial.

She is also driving organizational change; thanks to her efforts, the office now has three regional agents in outlying provinces, ensuring rights are protected in more places in Haiti.

In this struggle against impunity, Madame Elie regularly faces threats and intimidation by those who believe themselves above the law, but she humbly disregards these threats in order to discharge what she sees as her mandate to protect the Haitian people and uphold the tenets of the Constitution. She is an

inspiration to Haitians and to anyone working to make the world a more just place. And she is a fearsome foe of those who abuse their authority.

The international donor community, including the United States, believes that rule of law is very important to the success of democracies. We have actively supported this sector in Haiti and we will continue to stand with Haiti in this effort. But ultimately, it will be Haitians of courage, people like Florence Elie, who will shine the light on the dark corners of the system and make the reality here conform to the ideals of your law and constitution.

Ladies and gentlemen, it is my pleasure to announce Florence Elie as the 2011 Woman of Courage for Haiti.